

Samahan Kita:

Honor, Excellence, Compassion and Accompaniment

Commencement Speech

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Mga miyembro ng Lupon ng mga Rehente, Pangulos Danilo L. Concepcion at mga opisyaless ng UP System, Tsanselor Fidel R. Nemenzo, mga Bise Tsanselor, mga Dekano at mga opisyaless ng UP Diliman, mga kaguruan, mga kawani, isang maalab na pagbati sa inyong lahat.

Sa mga VIP naman. Sa mga magulang, lolo't lola, tiyo't tiya, kuya't ate kapatid, mga kabarkada, mga asawa't partner, MU, mga significant others, mga anak (lalo pa sa graduate students) at dahil ito'y virtual kaya nasa bahay kayo, kung sino pang mga kasama mo ngayon, mga kapitbahay, at pati na mga emotional support alaga natin, ang supporting cast of thousands sa mga bida natin ngayon, mga isko't iska, mga magsisipagtapos ngayong araw, ang class of 2020. Magandang magandang umaga sa inyong lahat.

Kumusta na kayo?

Opo, maraming kulang sa commencement natin ngayong taon: ang mga banda, mga performers, mass media, lalo pa si Abner Mercado at ang ABS/CBN, si Kuya Oble at naku, mga sunflowers, na dumating naman noong Hunyo, on time nga kaya lang na-usug natin ang commencement. We tried to make up, andito naman mga opisyaless sa Quezon Hall, andito ang sets na ginawa ni Toym Imao, at tiniyak namin na may mga letrato ng mga sunflowers, na gagamitin sa videos natin.

Kahit huli ng konti, tinuloy namin ang commencement. Now more than ever, we felt we needed to have a commencement ceremony. After all, we have been with you, I as your chancellor until March of 2020, through your academic journey.

Some time before the lockdown, I said yes to the College of Music when they asked me if I could do the message for their college recognition rites. When I read an article on something called the “art of accompaniment,” I said, this is perfect for the College of Music. The “art of accompaniment” appears in *Evangelii Gaudium* issued by Pope Francis in 2013, very well described as one that involves removing our sandals before the sacred ground of the other. (Ex 3:5).

I thought it was an elegant and powerful metaphor, especially in our culture where we remove our shoes, even slippers, before entering someone’s home out of respect. It is that same spirit that makes accompaniment an art. It is what we did when you first entered UP, when we oriented you and your parents. *Sinundo nga namin kayo*, with full respect and humility.

It is that respect that makes music so powerful as accompaniment, as we saw during the lockdown. I especially liked the way groups of artists would perform individually in their homes, and then, using electronic media, stitch their renditions together into a video to upload.

That is what we were doing as well during the lockdown, connecting with each other to make sense of a world in crisis.

The World Health Organization committed a faux pas introducing the term “social distancing” only to clarify in April that it might be better to use “physical distancing.” Although it has been months now since their clarification, the old term remains, and seems to have been translated, locally, into militaristic punitive models of Covid control, where suddenly it’s people who are the enemy, to be isolated, to be imprisoned.

Fortunately, people are wise and sensible, and many of us did what we could to fight the virus with physical distancing, yet recognizing that social solidarity was the most important tool in our arsenal. We learned that distance, however painful, could be overcome — a

simple “Kumusta na?” text message, longer emails, phone calls preferably with video — all saying, “Nandito ako, samahan kita.”

We are a culture of accompaniment, so well captured in the way “ka” as an affix is found in many of our languages to create nouns describing accompanied action (for example kasama, kabalikat, kalaro) as well as of inclusion (kaklase, kabayan, kapanalig, pati na ang katipunan). Kasama is of course the most powerful, often translated as comrade, as are its equivalents in other languages kadua in Ilokano, kauban in the Visayas.

We saw both accompaniment and inclusion during the lockdown and I thank UP Diliman and UP System for continuing a tradition of opening our doors to all in need. We hosted and housed, and took care of the needs of frontliners, stranded students, staff, construction workers, even as our alumni, faculty, students and staff launched numerous campaigns to raise funds, to collect relief goods, even to produce protective shields. Intuitively, we knew the imperative was to offer shelter, not incarceration. Kanlungang Palma was set up around that principle: kanlungan, hindi kulungan.

Donor fatigue, I was told, began to set in last month and yet just this week we saw the UP System, with alumni, launching a Kaagapay campaign to help students who will face difficulties going into online learning, because they do not have the financial requirements for WiFi connections and tablets and computers. Also this week, alumni organized to help our Ikot jeepney drivers, who are unlikely to get back to work for as long as students do not come back on campus.

Nandito kami became Nandito tayo, solidarity with many of our marginalized sectors, laylayan ng lipunan. During the lockdown, we were there for them too. Accompaniment too, meant giving them voice as we saw an escalating attack on our democratic institutions. The first protest rally in UP Diliman, I quickly texted organizers: please, please, the masks, the shields, the physical distancing. That too was part of accompaniment.

The pandemic challenges our definitions of accompaniment but always constant in here must be this respect for kapwa, of the sacred ground of humanity.

In our difficult times where families are often divided, accompaniment has become all the more important in terms of connectivity. It only takes one special person being available — not necessarily a parent, it can even be Ate or Kuya or even a younger sibling, a ninong or ninang, a teacher, or our best friends forever (oh but Covid, I hope, will not teach us there is forever) and many more — to make a difference. We have to be that someone for many, in different circumstances and stages of our lives.

As you set out into the world, I want you to think too of leadership as accompaniment. Without becoming elitist, let us face up to the reality of a nation expecting a UP graduate to take the lead in whatever profession we enter.

What will this leadership of accompaniment involve?

We recently celebrated the 50th anniversary of the First Quarter Storm of 1970, which was really about a generation, my generation, deciding that we needed to accompany the poor in their search for social justice and a yearning for a better life for future generations.

Sadly, many of the problems of 1970 have remained, and became the underlying conditions that have made it so difficult for us to manage the pandemic: the lack of decent housing and secure jobs, the lack of safety nets like unemployment insurance, the low levels of science and health literacy, political patronage, corruption. Covid-kupit is becoming a new term. This is why in UP, many of us bristle when we hear the term New Normal: huwag sanang OPM, oh promise me. What we need is a Better Normal, starting even as we continue to grapple with the pandemic.

The last few months we saw how much of a difference leadership made in our war against Covid-19. We saw how the world's most powerful and richest nation was brought to its knees, paying dearly in the cost of infections and deaths because of leadership marked by

hubris, victim-blaming and narcissism. But we saw too many examples of nations that provided leadership by accompaniment, and it is not surprising many of the best models were from nations with women heads of state, the most exemplary, I felt, being New Zealand's Jacinda Ardern, rushing to the scenes of disasters to comfort people, to share in their grieving, explaining, looking for options and then to speak out, when needed, with firm resolve to bring justice.

We had our share too of such leaders, women and men of courage and integrity and there will come a time when we pay them tribute.

Leadership by accompaniment involves presence, being there. . .and Covid-19 teaches us presence must be constant in our accompaniment of friends, family, communities and even the nation, so much so that people will feel us even when we are not around physically.

That sense of presence must be built though — you will be tested in your work places, in your profession. Prove yourself first as someone willing to listen, like our best musicians, to pick up on the flow of work and its details. Learn to work with the team, to feel what others feel (even with masks on), and to be empathetic, but with wisdom and discernment.

Don't let your diploma, your new position, get into your head. Leadership by accompaniment will mean you do not go off on your own asking people to follow you. Accompaniment is being at one's side and sometimes even being behind them, watching their backs.

Leadership by accompaniment must involve compassion by default, no second thoughts. It is our way of saying I trust you, and we must take extra effort to build that trust — world surveys show we have one of the lowest, if not the lowest trust ratings.

I return to your personal lives. To be a leader of accompaniment, you must make a more meaningful accompaniment part of your life. Think of how our parents and elders

accompanied us throughout our lives, up to today's commencement (even if you are doing this today sitting on the sofa), and it will make your own accompaniment easier.

We must consider, too, navigation as adding value to accompaniment, the navigation coming from a warm voice and, when times are safer again, hand-holding, an occasional hug, even our famous tapik that says: I am here but you will be the one who will get things done.

I could go on and on but accompaniment has become so much a part of our lives, "kasama" and other ka- terms referring to a person and to the action that must have many attributes of tiyaga, tapang and our UP hallmarks of dangal, husay at pagmamalasakit: honor, excellence and compassion.

We accompany someone but know all too well we will have to part ways at some point. When that time comes, accompaniment must be characterized by gratitude, for having the privilege of being allowed to be with someone. I want to thank parents and guardians for having trusted us in UP to accompany your children in their learning of skills for discovery and transformation. I want to thank all the faculty and staff who built the teams of accompaniment as we served our students. I cannot help but think of the similarities to the UP Symphonic Orchestra whose initials UPSO resonate with PUSO.

Panghuli, nais kong magpasalamat sa inyo, mga magsisipagtapos, sa pagtitiwalang ibinigay ninyo sa UP Diliman upang alalayan kayo sa loob ng apat, lima o minsan pa nga, sampung taon. Ngayon ay binubuksan na ng UP ang mga pintuan patungo sa bagong mundo. Gayunpaman, hindi magsasara ang mga pintuan nito para sa inyo lalo pa kapag kinailangan niyong muli ang aming kalinga. Gayundin, umaasa kami na paglilingkuran ninyo ang UP at ang bayan nating mahal kapag mangangailangan ang mga ito. Umaasa kami sa inyong paglilingkod, pagmamalasakit at paninindigan. Nawa'y magtagpo tayong muli, magsama ulit tayo, hindi sa pamamaraang birtuwal, kundi sa isang mas maayos at mas masaganang normal.